

January 1975

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### Recommended Citation

Gracy, David B. II, "Collecting for CLIO; Peanut Butter and Spilt Milk: A New Look at Collecting," *Georgia Archive* 3 no. 1 (1975) .  
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COLLECTING FOR CLIO\*

PEANUT BUTTER AND SPILT MILK  
A NEW LOOK AT COLLECTING

David B. Gracy II<sup>+</sup>

Collecting is the peanut butter and jelly sandwich of the archival profession. It is fun; it is nourishing; and it can be tedious and frustrating when it sticks to the roof of your mouth. Few other aspects of archival endeavor offer the warm satisfaction of bringing to light material previously lost to research. Collecting is as old as the preserving of information by man, and as innovative as the modern society it now serves. Just how innovative it must be to adapt to modern methods of record keeping, just how much change is taking place in collecting techniques and in the material being sought have drawn little comment from archivists, manuscript curators, and librarians who administer collections of records--all of whom, for our purposes, I lump under the term "archivists."

From the day the first record was systematically sought for permanent preservation in a repository of recorded information, archivists have collected under the "spilt milk" philosophy. The production of records was so meager, and the number of these documents that survived so scanty, that no one cried over what was lost, but rejoiced in what was

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\*This and the following two papers, by Steve Gurr and Tom Hill, were presented at the Society's Workshop on Archives and Records, November 22, 1974, in the opening session titled "Collecting for Clio: A discussion of the kinds of papers and records present-day archivists, manuscript curators, librarians, and historians should and should not be saving.--Ed.

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saved. Each and every scrap of paper lit up one more dark recess of the past. Genealogists know this better than most. They scour courthouses and archives seeking a will, a deed, a receipt--anything--not to write a full biography, but for basic documentation of one human being's existence.

In the twentieth century, however, we have swung the pendulum to the other extreme. Groups formerly faceless now create records. Persons on welfare, in hospitals, with insurance, who apply for credit, who pay income taxes--all complete forms and are the subject of files. Governments alone produce and receive, use and store data by the ton. The production is so massive, the entirely new profession of records management came into being within the last three decades to cope with the glut. Records managers design record keeping systems to pack the most information into the least space, to provide for the retention of paper records in the most accessible but economical way, and to dispose of records after they have fulfilled their purpose. Heaven knows records managers are sorely needed. The Federal Archives and Records Center in East Point, one of eleven such centers in the country, houses seven acres of records stacked on shelves 14 feet high and 75 feet long--650,000 cubic feet of records under one roof, enough to build a wall 30 inches high all the way around Atlanta's perimeter highway. But only 22,000 cubic feet are in the archives branch, barely three percent. The rest are records of no enduring value that are scheduled for eventual destruction. The three percent figure, incidentally, is not out of line for the federal government generally, and probably is not far below the figure for other governmental agencies, businesses, perhaps for our society as a whole.

We face abundance, overabundance. And overabundance challenges the comfortable "spilt milk" philosophy. From collecting virtually everything, we have presently to reorient our thinking to dispose of almost everything while searching out that valuable minority of records with enduring value.

The search is not as easy as it might have been either, because we have in this age greatly altered the form in which we create and store information, as well as our patterns of communication. Those who used to write letters revealing their feelings and recording their decisions now telephone, leaving no record more enduring than memory. Those who used to demand complete, thorough newspaper



reporting now flip on the television, whose record at best is a costly, difficult-to-obtain videotape that requires expensive hardware to play. With the computer we can manage, process and analyze information as never before, and we do. Who knows how much? The tape recorder gives us the capacity to capture the flavor and depth of events and personal involvement far more thoroughly than was possible with written memoirs. And some communication, like telephone conversations, can be captured to their fullest only on magnetic tape.

Perhaps the latest best example of the revolution in documentation is the resignation of President Nixon. Traditional documents in the form of memos, letters, and notes provided piles of evidence of wrongdoing in the Executive Department, but the "smoking gun" that linked the President with illegal activity was revealed in recorded conversations. Moreover, television provided far and away the best coverage of the resignation itself, including interviews, background reports, and the actual speech. I searched the newsstands of Atlanta for the traditional "extra" editions of newspapers normally published on such momentous occasions, and found but one.

If written history were the tracks of politicians, governments, and wars, as it largely was for so long, our search still would be rather straightforward. But during the past couple of decades historians have proliferated astoundingly, and likewise the subjects they have chosen to study, including such nontraditional areas as public health, urban affairs, the history of blacks and women in America, and organized labor, to name just five. Archives have responded to these demands for new documentation. A note in a magazine recently announced the founding of an archives of television commercials at the University of Arizona. Last February an archives of love letters appeared at the West Vancouver Public Library; before that a network of repositories collecting ephemera such as bumper stickers, buttons, handbills, napkins, menus, programs, and the like, gained national attention. Where there were no repositories devoted solely to organized labor fifteen years ago, there now are four.

The implications are many for the archival world. For one, the traditional approach of setting up a repository to collect like a vacuum cleaner within a given geographical area is unrealistic for twentieth century material. A

repository must establish for itself a manageable focus. New archives programs in Georgia certainly should not try to duplicate the work of long-established agencies--like the manuscripts division of the state archives, the special collections departments of the University of Georgia and of Emory University, the Atlanta Historical Society, and the Georgia Historical Society--by collecting traditional materials on Georgia politics and the Old South. Some may develop regional foci of concentration, such as Georgia State University which inaugurated a collection of Southern labor records three years ago. Others may build local or area collections of personal memorabilia or of business records. Just how fertile these fields can be and how much may be accomplished will be discussed in the papers to follow. There is room for more repositories--be they located in colleges, public libraries or historical societies--to collect in specific subject fields within designated geographic areas.

The program of the West Vancouver Public Library offers a good example of the new collecting. The library's archival enterprise began with a low-key effort to assemble some local history items. "One donation came from the widow of a turn-of-the-century high court judge," wrote the director. According to her journals from 1901 to the 1930s, "the lady . . . led a singularly boring existence--tea parties, bridge, and occasional horseback rides. One of the few lively events she recorded was a party at which the judge became hopelessly drunk! In retaliation she destroyed all his love letters. I mentioned the incident," he continued, "on a local talk show with the comment that it was a pity she kept the diary and burned the letters, which might have made better reading. The result was the donation to the library of a series of love letters (which incidentally, shed light on the early development of the Canadian railroad system). A short time later, the library issued a press release to the local papers announcing that the library was collecting love letters. The story was quickly syndicated by the wire services throughout the States and Great Britain," he concluded, and "the response has been overwhelming."<sup>1</sup>

The response points too to the fact that a great deal of material is being created now that ought to be saved, but which either has not been saved before, or has not been saved systematically. Perhaps a better example than love letters is ephemera--advertisements, announcements, badges, invoices, bookplates, broadsides, bumper stickers, calendars,



greeting cards, stock certificates, invitations, labels, letterheads, menus, napkins, trade cards, souvenirs, tickets, and the like. Russell Benedict of the University of Nevada at Reno, and the founder of a network of collectors of ephemera, call this "the primary source material of our times, and," he adds, "collecting it is likely to be one of the most. . .important things a librarian can do."<sup>2</sup> Others share his sentiment, because ephemera is a principal source of color and human interest for historians and writers on regional and local subjects.

Collecting of ephemera is not new. Indeed, many libraries that make no pretense of having an archival program have actively collected ephemera. Sadly, however, they have accumulated ephemera and treated it as a curiosity, a side show to their principal program. A survey made in July, 1973, of ephemera holdings in public, university, and historical society libraries revealed that most repositories did not accord their ephemera collection the attention--an adequate finding system--provided the book holdings.<sup>3</sup>

What the survey revealed, basically, was that these repositories do not have an integrated program. They collect for the sake of collecting, not to process and make available for research. They are, in effect, merely transferring bones from one graveyard to another. A modern archival enterprise, on the other hand, must be a well-rounded operation that runs its collecting program in tandem with the other phases of the endeavor.

What is new in collecting ephemera, then, is the philosophy of collecting it as a serious attempt to better document a movement, a time, or a place. Benedict describes how that began:

In 1965 I became a retiree on Social Security. I had then been gathering material for this library on communism, civil rights, the radical right, organized labor, and other topics . . . .[The] director of libraries. . .asked me to devote myself to the collection of ephemera, to document the times and their changes--as much for future research as for current use. . . .Not only the prejudices of radicalism, but the moderate views should be on hand. One hitch: the project could

not be financed. No funds were, or are, available for this special work. Thus, material could not be purchased, and there could be no salaried assistants.<sup>4</sup>

Benedict hove to his charge with zeal.

He finds his work "a continuing experience in human nature and motives."<sup>5</sup> No wonder. The focus of the collecting are women's groups, labor, the far left, gays, dissident students. One repository has "launched a program to interest the community in collecting clippings and pamphlets on items of local interest; hopefully, this program will enrich the collection of grass-roots political and educational systems, which in many ways are unique."<sup>6</sup> The philosophy of the public library member of the network is that "the alternative press is not the province of the researcher but can be made available to the worker, the drop-out, politician, single mother, high school student, and so on. . . .While our collection can be useful, presumably, to those for or against the movements, no particular effort will be made to achieve a 'balance.'"<sup>7</sup>

Ephemeraists echo Benedict too that collecting this type of material "is likely to be one of the most daring [and] difficult. . . .things a librarian can do." Rather than building bridges to the organizations producing the handbills, posters, buttons, bumper stickers, and so on, the ephemeraists pick up items from street vendors, demonstrators, sidewalk speakers. One repository has made arrangements with the Congressmen from its district to place in the library all the suitable items the politicians receive. More remarkable than the individual collecting techniques is the sharing arrangement by which repositories exchange duplicates, each building thereby a larger, more comprehensive collection than any one of them could have done alone. Always with room for "one more," the network now numbers more than 20 college and public libraries from California to Connecticut. Only three are located in the South (at Tulane University, the University of Virginia, and the College of Charleston). The way is open and the time is right to inaugurate one in Georgia.

As sources, materials, and techniques for collecting change, so does the relationship of the collector to the collectee. In the past, repositories occasionally attempted



to influence the creation of records in the manner of one which placed blank diary books in the hands of appropriate high public officials. The hope was that records would appear where otherwise there would have been a barren slate. Few of those who accepted the diaries so cheerfully, however, wrote more in them than their names. And there are enough important persons who create inadequate records that the spilt milk philosophy always will have a place.

Nevertheless technology has sprung to the archivist's aid. The tape recorder gives us the tool we have needed to be able to acquire basic information in the absence of a written record, or supplementary to it. But is this the archivist's job, ought he to be influencing the creation of records he keeps? At least in the case of oral history, the answer seems to be affirmative. Only the archivist can know where gaps exist in a collection or between collections. And few individuals are better placed to know inter-personal relationships revealed in papers, which oral history can enhance. If the archivist does not get the interview, chances are good that the respondent will be unavailable by the time a researcher seeks the information. The caution every archivist must exercise is to insure that he does not divert so much of his precious resources to oral history that the manuscript material under his care languishes, or potential collections slip away.

By collecting from contemporaries who can be taped and who donate their own records, are we influencing the preservation of information in a more subtle way? In other words, are the records doctored by persons giving their own files because the donors are conscious that the deeds recorded among their materials will be open to the scrutiny of the ages? Before this century, precious few persons dreamed of the possibility that their letters, diaries, and similar routine communications would end up in an archives. If they did think of others reading their handiwork, doubtless the consideration was more in the form of one love letter writer of the 1890s, who scrawled that she was "writing in pencil so that it should fade, preventing it reaching strange hands." That letter, incidentally, remains as legible today "as the day it was written." All collecting archivists can tell you stories of "the ones that got away," of collections that families or organizations, apparently in fear of some embarrassing disclosure, would not make available for research. We have not forgotten L. Patrick Gray's admission of destroying Watergate evidence. But I know of



no case where records were falsified before deposit in an archives for the purpose of misleading future generations of researchers. Classic destruction, I believe, continues to be far more common than falsification.

The legal sharks in the archival sea have not really changed either, but they surely have become more evident. Most of us grew up in an archival world in which collecting was simple. One went out, took physical possession of a collection, processed it, and opened it subject only to donor-imposed restrictions. Few worried about forms transferring legal title, thought about the literary rights in the material or knew that such rights were separate from physical possession. The records most archives collected and serviced were so old that the issue seemed largely academic. But now as the information we are saving comes closer to the present, the archivist must recognize the inherent problems and know his position before he ever begins to collect.

There are three separate but intertwined issues here: 1) libel, 2) literary rights, and 3) privacy. Libel, of course, is defamation of character in written form. Archives become involved when a researcher quotes from the collection of one person a statement detrimental to another. The archives is party to the matter because it holds libelous material, not because it has published the statement. Normally the trouble can be avoided by imposition of suitable restrictions allowing adequate time for tempers to cool and the matter to change from a contemporary to a historical controversy.

Literary rights are the common law rights of any individual to first publication of his writing. Thus, a person who donates his collection to an archives gives physical possession of the carbons of his outgoing letters and the originals of the letters he received. But he himself can give the rights to publish--to print--only half of that: to his own writings (his carbons). A researcher, then, does not have the freedom to quote from just any materials he finds in an archives, rather only those whose literary rights the archives holds.

To spell out the situation as plainly as possible to all concerned, as well as to protect the repository, an archives, and especially one dealing with contemporary material, should draw and have an attorney approve a deed-

of-gift form. By his signature to it, a donor can formally transfer to the archives physical possession of a collection and all the literary rights he owns in it. To further protect itself, the repository also should develop a form on which each researcher recognizes that he must obtain permission to quote from material in the archives. The purpose is not to discourage research and publication, but to require the user to listen to and understand both his privileges and the rights of others.

The right to privacy protects a person--or gives him recourse--from use without his consent of information about him. Where literary rights protect only a person's own words from being used without his permission, the right to privacy protects him from disclosure of the information in any form, whether in his words or someone else's. Medical, social welfare, and credit bureau records, as well as labor grievances, fall obviously into this category. As this century has advanced, the private information in this sort of file has grown tremendously. Some feel that because of the volume alone the files should be destroyed in as short a time as possible. Yet these files have value collectively as well as individually. Like statistical information in the census, data from them demands compilation and analysis. The lead article in last fall's issue of GEORGIA ARCHIVE, as well as the first two articles in the July, 1974, American Archivist, deal with these very issues. This is a frontier for most archivists. But all agree on one point: discretion cannot be left to researchers or donors. Archivists must define their position before the material is ever collected, must collect on their terms, and must have their position in writing clear to all.

Collecting brings to mind the two little boys coming upon an escalator for the first time. One turned to the other and asked, "What are they going to do when the basement fills up with steps?" It just doesn't happen that way, collecting is never finished. But it should never be started until the repository has a definite purpose and goal, understands its relationship with donors and researchers, and knows its position on the legal issues.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Martin, "Valentines for Every Season: Love Letters for Libraries," Wilson Library Bulletin, 48 (February, 1974), 469-470.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Akeroyd and Russell Benedict, eds., "A Directory of Ephemera Collections in A National Underground Network," Wilson Library Bulletin, 48 (November, 1973), 236.

<sup>3</sup> M. Therese Lawrence, "Are Resource Treasures Hidden from Scholars in Our Libraries? What is the Access to Ephemera?" Special Libraries, 64 (July, 1973), 285-290.

<sup>4</sup> Akeroyd and Benedict, eds., "A Directory of Ephemera Collections," 237.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 250.